

THE SHAME OF GOLD¹

By CHARLES J. FINGER

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“**L**’INTRANSIGEANT” recently printed a short account of the failure of the Franco-Brazilian ornithological expedition. Reading, you may have caught a hint of tragedy in it; but it may have escaped you, because our papers barely noticed the matter. I was specially interested because of a conversation I had had with a stranger who knew Brazil in a peculiar way.

Knowing Columbus, Ohio, you cannot fail to remember the place where the C. D. & M. Traction crosses the main business street. It is crowded at the corner, for a newspaper office is there, and bulletins of the world happenings are posted every hour or so. On the day that I have in mind, Hall and I paused there for a moment. A new bulletin was being put up, which read:

Franco-Brazilian expedition formed to explore upper Amazon territory.

Hall made a remark laughingly as to new markets to exploit, and hurried on his way to meet his investment broker; but I, gazing upward, unaware of his disappearance, said:

“Yes, there are still spots on this little world untrodden by the foot of man.”

Turning, I discovered his absence, while from another man who stood where he had been came the words, very decidedly:

“I doubt it.”

“But why?” I asked, mildly interested.

“Good reason,” he replied, with a little shrug of his shoulders. There was a moment of hesitation, then, simultaneously, we both started off in the same direction, and

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for half a block walked almost side by side. At a word it transpired that we were both bound for the depot, for the Cincinnati train.

Later, on the train, he resumed the subject. "I know Brazil a little," he said, "and far out of the beaten track, but I know it superficially. Others have been there—many others, and their lines are crossed and crisscrossed."

"White men?" I asked.

"Certainly, white men. That's how I was surprised into the remark I made there at the bulletin-board. Men poke everywhere about the world." The man sketched out roughly on the palm of his hand, and with his pipe-stem, an imaginary map. "You recall the outline of South America," he went on, "nearly pear-shaped, an elongated pear. Now, here is Peru, a little above the base of my thumb. Over here, under the little finger, is Cape St. Roque. I have been here. Cut across like this." He drew a bold stroke entirely across his hand. "That means Callao, into the Andes, and so north. North to strike the head-waters of the Amazon, and then trouble, fever and hunger. Wealth, too, in a way."

"Love of adventure?" I hazarded.

He regarded me intently for a moment. I noticed his iron-gray hair and queerly wrinkled face. He was not yet middle-aged.

"No. I never tried to analyze. I don't know. I'm not really adventurous. I like to be alone. Also, I drift, perhaps. When in a crowd, nothing seems to be worth while, and one is an ant in a hurrying mass. Alone, thoughts come with force. They strike one as bluntly as seen things impress themselves. I can't explain."

I was unwilling to press him with questions. He was not the kind of man that could be drawn out. When he spoke again there was a note of quiet, pleasant excitement.

"By the way, in Prescott's 'Peru' there is a passage somewhere telling of one party of Spaniards crossing the Andes and discovering silver. Then, being unable to get back, they built a boat and floated down the Amazon, and presently turned up in Cuba again. It's there somewhere. Or in Irving. In Prescott, I think."

I told him that I had a faint recollection of something like that.

"Well," he continued, paying little heed, "that was, roughly, four hundred years ago. No modern things to use, no chart, no map, no compass, no tools, or camp paraphernalia; just plain, dogged go-at-it and keep on. Keep in one direction, and you get somewhere. That's how Magellan felt his way, and Columbus his. Then the old Norsemen in open boats. It excites me thinking of that. It was always that way, one man pushing on."

Again he lapsed into one of his ruminating moods.

"But about Prescott— Once I was nearly all in. Over the Andes I'd gone, and if I didn't hit the trail of the Pizarro men, I'm crazy. I never saw a helmet in my life until then, and I came across one under an overhanging rock. A mighty thing it was—the rock I mean—a kind of excavation under it that formed a cave.

"The helmet was there, and a few pieces of steel—short pieces; a broken sword, perhaps. I took the helmet and carried it for days, then threw it away. A man can't be burdened with plunder like that.

"You see, I'd been on the trail for more than three months that time. Now and then I caught sight of an Indian, and once I got an arrow through my left shoulder. There were days and weeks in which I saw no sign of human life, but, by George! there was plenty of good company. Insects, you know, great glorious things. Butterflies, too—butterflies that run and make a little noise like a rattle when they fly away. It's laughable. Living things are great fun to watch. And then the concerts at evening at sunset, crickets and things. I don't know their names. Magnify insects, and I reckon you'd have a fantastic world.

"When I did see a human face again, it gave me a start. I'd found a good spot in the jungle to rest in. The stream ran clear there, this stream I'd been following, and the bottom of it was sandy. One does not often find a place like that. Thinking of an ideal spot, you imagine a stream in the shade of a tree, with grass all about. But when you get your stream, there is often mud, and where there is shade there is no grass. Here there was everything; a

pleasant kind of spot, and I didn't move all day. I just rested and smoked and bathed my feet and watched the insects. It was quiet, too, still as midnight, and the sun never pierced the leafy roof. It was just a great, green arch like a cathedral, with smooth, lofty tree-trunks, chamber after chamber of green, and, what was specially fine, the place was clear of lianas. So I rested there and read an old newspaper I had picked up in Callao and brought along. I'd read it before dozens of times. Then my eyes would tire of the print, and I'd doze off. I did that dozens of times. The peace of the place was too much for me—too much both ways. The perfectness of it overcame me, and drove me to the little thing, the silly newspaper.

"Once I woke with the notion that some one was watching me. What I saw gave me a shiver. There was a big flowering-bush not ten yards away. They were great red flowers, meat color, like raw beef, and right between two of the flowers, as if it was stuck in a cleft, was a man's face, snag-toothed, red-bearded, shock-haired. It might have been a great ape. The eyes stared straight at me. Remember, I'd seen no natives for a long while, nor was there a settlement near, and it was a region as big as the State of Illinois, and no white man, I thought, had ever set foot there. Yet here was a face, and it was not the face of a native. I knew enough to keep still, and only peered through the narrowest slits I could make with my eyelids, so I judged that the face in the flower would think I slept. Believe me, I watched closely.

"It moved my way, but cautiously as a snake, and I saw a hairy chest, a hairy human being, and stark. He came on hands and toes, and I knew that he was a fellow used to the jungle and no native. Noiselessly he came, not stirring leaf or blade, hardly. The smell of his body assailed me unpleasantly, for there were sweetly smelling spice-trees, and the human smell was rank as poison.

"I sat up suddenly when the fellow was not more than five yards away. He stopped, rigid, expectant. Fear was in his eyes. Perhaps he saw it in mine. In such cases men hate each other. Each resents the presence of the other where white men should not be. Then he rose to his

feet, turned without a word, his feet making no sound, and made for the flowering-bush again. I knew in a moment, somehow, that he was ashamed of his nakedness in the presence of another of his race. So I hailed him. At that he stood, regarding me with doubt.

"Well, he was one of those queer fish found everywhere. He told me his tale that night. Of months and of years he had long lost count, and he wanted to know of things strange to me. Queer things he had been interested in, it seemed—a Londoner I guess, with the peculiar sharpness of interest in political things that they have. It must have been meat and drink to him, his interest in public affairs. He talked of Gladstone and wanted to know whether some fellow named O'Donnell who had killed some informer was hanged or not. From such things we located the date when he left as about 1883. So he had been there nearly thirty-five years. Think of it!

"But as to the unbelief of people who are credulous on some things—tell people that for that length of time a white man, an Englishman, had lived with savages, and every single one would jump to the conclusion that he was chief among them. Naturally. On the general principle, I suppose, that it is better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven. But was he king? Boss? Chief? Not by a long chalk. And naturally. The man from civilization was the servitor. The savages were the superiors. Such things as he once knew were useless in the wilds. Mind you, in civilization machinery is master, and man the servant of the machine. Take him away from the mechanical things and cast him on his own resources, and ninety-nine cases out of a hundred he starves. He can't make a fire, catch his food, build his shelter. He is afraid to test things as to their edibility. He cannot run, fight or climb. Among animals he is a weakling. Face to face with nature he despairs. His education he finds to be ignorance. His overpowering fear is that he may be hurt. You see, in civilization man is protected, he does not have to struggle. All that he needs to do is to sell himself, his time, his life, for the best price he can command. So he becomes soft. He is unfit for liberty. Turn him loose, and he is as useless as a

canary-bird or a common hen turned adrift. So was it with this fellow, Elfner. The savages were his superiors, and he was the servitor. He had ceased to concern himself about anything more than the needs of the body; and his brain had gone. Once, I gathered, he had told them tales of the city life, but the things he tried to picture they could not conceive; so he was lowered still further in their estimation and set down as a liar.

"From this Elfner I learned of the Chequa tribe. He warned me against them as a vicious people that had no dealings with other tribes, and indicated their valley as farther east. That I was not to be led to his tribe was made very clear. Obviously, he was ashamed of his degradation. But really it was not degradation in one way of looking at it. There are almost no men who would not rapidly find their level in a savage tribe, and that level would be below its general average, because of the new valuations that the man from civilization cannot compass.

"There was a stranger tale he began to tell me—a tale of a swamp-land to the southeast and of monstrous, yellow earth creatures that heaved themselves out of the mire. Then I was sure he was crazed. I knew of the giant armadillos and great sloths, but it was none of these. He was loath to continue, and parried my questions. He wanted to know of things in the world that he would never again see. He wanted to tell me of John L. Sullivan and of Jake Kilrain, or of sordid crimes that had interested him. Above all he wanted to talk of eating, of ham and eggs, of bread and cheese and beer. Once, for instance, when he had begun to tell me something of the Chequas, he broke off quite unexpectedly, and apropos of nothing went into a little rhapsody. 'Say,' he said, 'this 'ere is a dull place. I often think of colors, and there's a bird all colors, and I always think of when you hold a glass of whiskey up to the light. Lord! Lord!' At that he fell into a reverie and sat hunched, his chin on clenched fist. Then he grew melancholy. 'These 'ere fellers in my tribe, they got me goin', they 'ave. It's work, work, work. An' if I don't, it's punishment tied up to a ant's nest.'

"His talk was jumbled, disjointed, and I had much ado

to get something from him relative to the country. Very little I got, after all. We had talked for perhaps a couple of hours when a ululation filled the air. 'It's them blacks callin' me,' he said, leaping to his feet. Now, while I was not anxious for his company, I felt an urge to invite him to go with me; but, to my relief, he refused on the ground that his masters would follow, capture and kill him. When the ululation was again heard, he seemed panic-stricken, stood a moment irresolute, then turned and fled into the bush as a dog would on hearing the insistent call."

The man stopped, and I hazarded the remark that it was strange to meet a white man thus, because the chances against an encounter were slight.

"That's so," he said.

"And the reference to those strange earth creatures. Didn't you learn anything further?"

He looked at me and shook his head doubtfully, and a little puzzled frown appeared and disappeared.

"No. But I may have seen one, too. I don't know."

"May I hear?" I asked.

"There's nothing to tell, because I'm not sure. And yet—" He passed his hand over his brow. "I may have been mistaken. It was after I had left the gentle people, and I was not myself then. I was worried, grieved, half-starved. It is all muddled.

"You see, after Elfner left I decided to find the valley he had told me of, and I did find it without any particular difficulty. It was a bird that attracted me, a quetzal. If I had not gone toward it, I might have missed the place. But I never could resist watching a quetzal, for it is the most wonderful thing that God has made, the most exquisite thing in creation. To see it, a living thing of metallic green—gold-green and scarlet-breasted, with tail-feathers of jet and ivory—is an experience. You watch it and lose yourself in admiration. Nothing else is so gorgeous. I have watched as the light struck them, and have seen them change from violet to steel-blue, but colors that live. Then the bird moves slightly, and the blue is blue-green, then again gold-green, and there are crimson flashes and purple. And there was the valley, and it was the valley of quetzals

and butterflies, and in it lived the gentle people. I stayed there many months, peaceful months, only to leave in sorrow. A gentle people, indeed! Never did I hear a harsh word or see an ungente thing. I do not think that they knew of war or of violence. To live was sweet in that valley of flowers and birds. There were sounds of living things as sweet as the musical ripples of a little brook, and the breeze was soft and laden with perfume. So I came to love the gentle people and their land.

"It may seem odd to tell you this, but I have told you much, and the mood is on me, and the place in which I tell it to you is odd, here where there is the noise of people and of the moving train and where there is glaring light or sooty smoke, and where every one is burdened with the stern anxiety of duty. And yet it all comes to me as the memory of a summer day may come to some poor fellow in prison—the memory of that spot where existence is facile and where trifles give joy and where people live as birds live. While there I knew a fresh vigor of soul. I always seemed to be on the point of grasping and understanding things, and the thought lived in me always that I should never do a thing to bring the sorrow of the outside world among this people. The memory is strong upon me now, and it came to me as a dull blow when I read the bulletin uptown. I felt as the prisoner might when the judge said the death sentence. It seemed to mean that, you know."

The man paused and relit his pipe. He gave a puff or two and laid it aside again. Then he leaned back in his seat, folded his arms and dropped his chin on his chest.

"All this noise about us must make what I tell you seem unreal. I appreciate that fully. Sometimes I think that out there I lost something well worth the losing, and found instead a precious thing. Looking back, I seemed to have touched the supernatural. I wonder if you understand. What I lost enriched me, and I seemed to have lost forever my own people and the sins of avarice and anger and pettiness. It was no illusion. There *was* the valley of peace. There *is* the valley of peace. But I fear the ravening hand now stretched out.

"There was a child there, a thing of beauty, who led me about at times after I had been accepted as a visitor. Endol was her name, and she was a dancing creature, who weaved circlets of flowers and often brought to me, laughingly, water to drink, bearing it in a flattish shell which held only a taste. I see her now, a bright fairy, dancing and chasing the cloud shadows on the green, playing with the birds, clapping her hands as she ran after butterflies, but never trying to catch them. Do you know, at such times the memory of my own land was as a dark and fearful dream. I remembered slum children. The memory of the things that clatter about us in houses and in cities, and the fret and the evil and the filth and the sickness—these things bore upon me and oppressed my spirit. Now, sitting here, remembering that valley of joy, it is as if I were in hell, and it is from that hell that I am trying to escape, for all has been dark and ugly since I left.

"One day Endol brought me a golden-colored flower, a new one to me. I saw that she bore a shell in her left hand. When I made a motion to take it she prevented me. Playfully, I held her, and as I did so, she chanced to tip the shell, and a yellowish sand poured forth and lay lightly on a large leaf. Looking, I saw that it was gold dust. At that Endol laughed, stooped, scattered the gold, and, gathering the grains that lay on the leaf, threw them afar.

"That naturally set me to wondering as well as wandering, for thus far I had confined my walks to the upper end of the valley. As it fell out, the next day I came upon a flat rock at the foot of a vine-hung tree, and there in plain view was a shell, much larger than that which Endol had had. It held gold dust, and a few nuggets, the best of them not larger than a small pea. The shell had apparently been set there and forgotten with the carelessness of a child tired of a plaything. The gold was not free from iron dust, but I saw at a glance that the vein from which it had been taken was extraordinarily rich. So it came to me to think that this people knew nothing of the value of gold and perhaps used it as a plaything. I suppose I should have left it there, but I did not. Few men living as you and I have lived in a workaday world could resist the

temptation to bear it away. So I took it to the bower in which I slept.

"Now, Endol and another child met me on the way and, chattering and laughing, reached for the shell. I handed it to them. Their actions astonished me. They drew slightly aside; their merriment fell from them, and they held a rapid, whispered conference. Endol's friend, the older of the two, seemed the most urgent, and her counsel apparently prevailed, for they set off running down the valley with the gold. They seemed possessed of a new fear, one that I could not understand.

"Soon after they returned with others, men and women, and I could see that there was consternation. I was reminded of a crowd I once saw running to the pit-mouth when the news of trouble came.

"Sima, a handsome youth with a splendid head ornament of quetzal feathers, addressed me. He was gentle, almost persuasive. At first I could not understand what he was driving at. There were evidently references to a people and the setting sun, and in the midst of his discourse others came up and now and again tried to aid him in making me understand, as people will do all over the world when a foreigner is dense. Presently Sima ceased, and another, an older man, took up the parable. He grew excited in the telling of the tale and, as I gathered, was eager to impress upon me that there was an evil time when hate and murder and greed, until then unknown, had come into the land. But it was not until he roughly fashioned a cross with a couple of sticks and broke it to pieces that a light dawned on me. Then when he told me of white men from the north, it dawned upon me with clearness that here was a tribal memory of the coming of Pizarro into the land of the Incas. Understanding that, I could piece things together, the ancient wrong done to a gentle people in the name of the cross, the white man's greed for gold, which had been a specific cause of strife and disorder, the hopeless resistance of an unarmed people, and the cruel acts of retaliation. From another point of view I saw what the lust of empire meant, and I saw how those who preached civilization, philanthropy and religion came burn-

ing, shooting, destroying and subjugating the weak, the simple, the harmless. The forefathers of this people had escaped. What wonder, then, that to them gold stood as an evil, something to hide and thrust away as unclean lest its glitter again attract these who bear death in their hands.

"I saw all that in a flash, and I understood the vague sense of imminent chaos that must have possessed the simple, happy folk when they pondered on what might happen if gold-mad white men again came ravening. The wonder was that they did not slay me when first I came.

"The gold-bearing sand was exceptionally rich in the little river. Grubbing about, I found pockets in the bed-rock full of gold. I even amused myself for a time extracting some of it and piling it in little heaps here and there on stones, and once I dammed up a section of the stream, turning the current so as to expose the river-bed, thus laying bare a new and unexpected vein. But it meant nothing to me then, for I still enjoyed the sighing of the wind through the silky grass, the sweetness of the day, and the fullness of the earth. The water that dripped sparkling from my finger-tips was finer to me than the sifting gold.

"One day I found the cave. I had not found it before simply because I had not sought it. There was no attempt on the part of the folk to conceal its location, nor was there displayed any desire to keep me from it.

"It was an opening in a hillside almost six feet long and four high, a square, natural gap, and the chamber within was at least thirty by thirty. The rays of the western sun flooded the place. For over three hundred years, perhaps, the people had hidden their gold there. From that you may have some idea how things were. The stuff lay scattered over the floor of the cave. I worked my fingers through the gold near the opening, and it was knuckle-deep before I touched the rock. In the farther corner was a sloping heap of the stuff, and it had been there so long that the iron dust had blown away. It shone dully as the sun touched it. Here and there were small nuggets, some as large as a cherry. Leaving the cave, I found a pile of them, oddly shaped, laid along a large, flat rock. They

were evidently the playthings of children. I remember noticing one, flattish and almost heart-shaped. It had a hole through it, and I strung it and hung it round my neck. Look at this."

As he spoke he fumbled at his soft shirt-collar and pulled up a little nugget, which he handed to me.

"It's all I have to show," he said as he returned it to its place. "That night I did not sleep. Strangely enough, my mind took a twist. The life I was living fell behind me, as it were, and I was filled with a new desire. It was not really a desire for wealth, but rather a desire for power. That was it, a desire for power. That old newspaper I told you of came to my mind, with all that it stood for. I began to dream of walking into my native town, into Hillsboro, and showing off. Crazy, isn't it? But it was so. They were day-dreams that might have pleased a boy, and it is almost too banal to tell, the rapid succumbing to temptation. I had a vision of becoming the local 'big man,' of buying out the banker, of building a fine house, of owning a splendid automobile, of servants, and all that kind of thing. Things! things! things! The pageantry of wealth! So dreaming, the quiet of the valley and the peace of it became a hateful thing, and I longed for the sound of a thousand footsteps and a thousand wheels, for the noise of streets, and the haste and the clatter and the excitement. Gradually the idea took possession of me that the gold was mine and that it was a weak sentimentality which would prevent a capable white race from using that which a brown-skinned folk knew not how to use. I planned and dreamed, planned and dreamed. The poison was at work.

"Weeks and weeks it took me to carry the gold to the hidden canoe. I thought at the time that I was unwatched, but I do not think so now. Some of the stuff I loaded direct from the river sand, but by far the greater part I bore from the cave. Of course there were days when I hesitated, half repenting. But, on the whole, greed had me.

"One day I saw Sima and Capaca, standing side by side, looking at me, and I was suddenly overcome with shame. There fell away from me my desire to leave. The glamor

faded. It was as if I had been discovered handling filth by those whose good opinion I valued, and the hot blood rushed tingling to my cheeks. I wanted to make my peace with the people again, but knew that to do so was hopeless now. So I stood irresolutely by my canoe, and I hated myself for my insincerity.

"Sima came down to me. He said no word, but, with a look half pity, half contempt, handed me his spear, and with a gesture dismissed me and turned his back. For a moment I wished that he had thrust the spear through me.

"So it was that I came to leave the valley where I had known peace, and from then time was for me little but physical weariness. There were days when I lay half-dead in the canoe on my bed of gold, tortured by flies and things that bit and stung—days and days of misery when I wished myself dead. Once, it seemed ages, a hovering cloud of insects followed me, sometimes settling on me so thickly that my arms were black. My bodily suffering was great, but greater still the suffering within.

"I think that day after day in that jungle drove me mad, and there were times when I was aware of nothing in the world but the rank smell of decaying vegetation and a black strip of water winding, winding, winding through a canon of dark brown earth through which great roots thrust themselves like snakes. Days of impenetrable gloom there were, and there were days when all about me there seemed to be hushings, then hissing whisperings and pointing fingers and peering eyes. Again there was a sensation that music was about me, and I seemed to hear at a distance the opening chords of a brass band. I knew that I was fever-stricken.

"Once I dared to land at a place where the virgin forest seemed to end. There was a great green, open space, a mighty clearing, and a fringe of trees between that and the river. I was the victim of a strange hallucination, and it was as if the whole world were moving swiftly to the right, swiftly, horribly swiftly, and I alone stood still. I fought against it, fought myself. Do you understand? It changed to a sensation of rushing backward. So dizzy I became that I was constrained to squat at the foot

of a tree, pushing against it hard with my back, and press my temples until I felt the pain of it. Then I heard a sound and looked up. I saw, or thought I saw, something. The earth seemed to tremble and heave. Out from it came swiftly a hideous thing, clay-colored and huge, a mighty mass of living flesh. The mud fell from it to right and left. I was breathless and unable to stir. The thing pushed upward and forward with clumsy, lumbering movements, side to side, extricating itself, growing huger each moment. Then I realized that what I saw was only the head and shoulders. The head turned slightly, so that I saw the upper part of it, blunt and triangular beyond the shoulder. The heavy-lidded eyes I saw. Then I noticed the mud dripping heavily, and part of the fore leg coming from the slime. My God! Send that there are no such things on earth and that I was really mad!

"I remember rolling down the steep bank and falling into the river, so shaded and still, and then there was an awe-inspiring roar, dreadful to hear. I swam. I do not know. I cannot talk of it."

The man sighed deeply. It was almost a stifled sob. He was ashen-faced. When he spoke again, his voice was perceptibly huskier.

"There is no more to tell," he said. "There were weeks and weeks of misery in that jungle, and wanderings that I forget—wanderings in the swamp lands, and most wonderfully I came to Mannos and, in time, to Para, where the consul was good to me."

He ceased suddenly and fell to smoking. It was a long time before I dared to speak, but said at last:

"And you propose to return?"

"I want to get back to the people, to where the superstition of gold is absent," he said. "Only there is the world sane. Only there do people enjoy their days and love the earth and know the beauty of life. Gold blinds all others. So I must go to the gentle people again. That is, if they will have me. Then there's this expedition."

His voice was tense now.

"Suppose. You see, once I might have been a traitor to them. I dreamed of something of the sort, a betrayal to

my own people. If this expedition is a success— Well, where white people go and where there is gold, sorrow and disease and death follow. The consul at Para knew something of my story. Would it not be a good thing to save a race, a gentle people, from destruction?"

The man's story stayed with me. And, as I said, since learning of the failure of the expedition, I have wondered much.